

Land scarcity has led to cremations and columbaria replacing burial grounds to house the dead. But alternatives such as sea, park and scatter burials can also be explored.

Jostling for space after death

By LILY KONG and JAMES SIDAWAY
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THE question of where we go when we die has long been one of the main puzzles for humanity. After all, our species is unique among life on earth in being aware of our own mortality. None of us will live forever.

But where we go after death is far from being just a question for personal contemplation or faith, or indeed something addressed by philosophers and theologians. It is not only a question about heaven or hell, reincarnation or eternal rest, but also a practical issue for those – family or friends – who are left behind.

And in cases where there are no friends or family, governments or hospitals are faced with what to do with an uncollected corpse.

Thus, the question of where we go after death is also about access to burial, crematoria and memorial spaces – pragmatic issues that confront urban planners, who often have to balance the needs of the dead (and their relatives) and the needs of the living.

No space for the dead?

IN SINGAPORE, where land scarcity is an abiding challenge, spaces for the dead have historically given way to spaces for the living. Few will remember the cemetery in Tiong Bahru (literally, new cemetery) – it made way in the 1920s and 1930s for Singapore Improvement Trust housing projects.

More will recall the immigrant-established Cantonese burial grounds in Bishan, which gave way to a thriving Housing Board estate in the 1980s. In more recent memory, exhumations and re-development at Bidadari Cemetery and Bukit Brown have been hotly debated.

In many Asian cities, particularly those confronted by increasing land scarcity, death and burial practices have changed over several decades – in order to reduce the use of space for the dead, so as to release land for the use of the living.

The most significant conversion has been from traditional grave burials to cremation and the use of columbaria, which has been encouraged by government agencies in many places, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and China.

In earlier years, there was much resistance to cremation but, in more recent times, there has been a marked shift to this practice and the placing of ashes in columbarium niches. In fact, now, this is often the default option for many after death.

In still more recent years, even columbaria have become overcrowded, and new spaces have had to be found and new practices invented.

Among practices now promoted are sea burials, scatter burials, and woodland burials (the scattering of ashes in the seas and parklands, and the burial of urns with ashes in woodlands respectively). These methods are being touted as “eco-friendly” options.

In Hong Kong, for example, the government introduced a set of guidelines for public sea burials in 2007, motivated by a desire to find solutions to the expected shortage of burial and columbaria places. This put an end to a 22-year ban on sea burials (although there were such burials in international waters before 2007).

In Taiwan, woodland burials involve placing the ashes inside urns made of biodegradable materials (such as paper, starch and corn-based materials) that are in turn placed in the earth next to an existing tree. One tree stump is able to accommodate the ashes of four to eight persons.

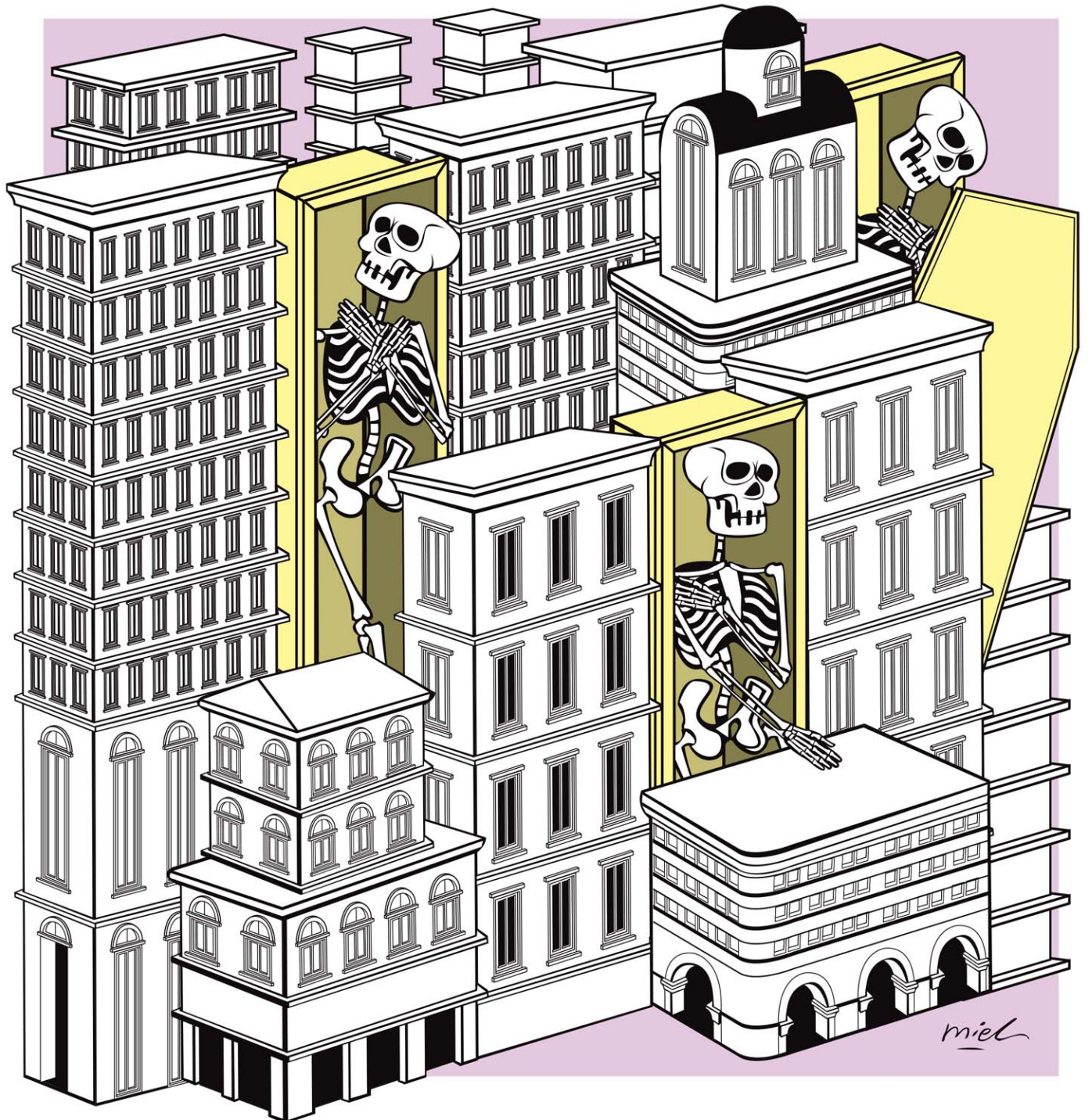
Within six months, the urns degrade, and the ashes become one with the earth. The spot can then be used again for other burials, thus allowing more remains to be placed in the same plot of land.

For parkland or scatter burials, the ashes of the deceased are scattered into flower-filled gardens and covered with earth after the funeral rites are conducted. Family members then place fresh flowers in the area to mark the end of the ceremony.

In all these approaches, there are no traditional tombstones or graves. This reduces the amount of land needed, especially since the site can be used again and again. As burial methods have changed, so too have the nature of commemorative rituals – the annual Qing Ming Jie (Tomb Sweeping Festival), for example, has seen the rise of online and mobile phone rituals in China.

Green burial grounds

ELSEWHERE, the rising cost of funerals and perceptions that undertakers might be too profit-orient-



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ed have spurred some people to seek alternatives to conventional burial or cremation, dispensing with traditional undertakers and ceremony.

In Britain, there are now 270 sites for what is called “green” or “natural” burial. Although such sites can also be found in other European countries, as well as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, Britain leads the world in having the greatest number.

Green burial grounds have been permitted as the law does not require burials to take place only on consecrated or official sites. Subject to approval from the local councils that are responsible for regulating land use, anyone in Britain can apply to establish a burial ground.

Taking advantage of this, farmers, nature reserves and municipalities are now among those offer-

ing green burials. Graves at such sites usually have no memorials or bear only inconspicuous ones, and many of the sites are managed foremost as nature reserves. Suitable coffins are, of course, biodegradable.

In a more ecologically conscious age, the idea that we should minimise our impact on the environment and seek to be closer to nature is thus being extended into and beyond the grave.

Just what is the potential of such an argument for shifting behaviour and belief systems – which would go a long way towards helping urban planners and policymakers find innovative solutions in the face of space constraints as well as cultural resistance?

Alas, the answer is far from simple.

First, most of these new approaches will still require cremato-

ria to be built, the location of which will invariably create contention. De-linking the location of crematoria and the site for commemoration would be helpful, since the former can withstand remoteness while the latter depends on accessibility.

Second, deep-seated symbolic meanings and values associated with “deathscapes” are hard to change. Noted anthropologist Mary Douglas introduced the notions of purity and danger, clean and unclean, pollution and taboo. In many cultures, death, dead bodies and their ashes are associated with pollution rather than purity. This, in essence, lies at the heart of objections to locating any facility related to death in the proximity to the living.

The authorities elsewhere have sought to encourage sea, woodland or parkland burials, using numerous arguments designed to assure residents of purity and cleanliness from a scientific standpoint.

In Hong Kong, for example, to persuade the public of the safety and hygiene of sea burials, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department pointed out that human ashes formed as a result of extremely high temperatures (about 850 deg C) are non-polluting.

In reality, the obstacle is a

sense of the polluted and unclean in a symbolic rather than a scientific sense.

Landscape design aimed at creating relaxing environments in parks while having them serve as sites for the ashes of the deceased attempts to eradicate the notion of pollution and emphasise that of purity. Yet, deep-seated belief systems are hard to change, and could require counter-symbolic actions combined with pragmatic or scientific ones.

Thus, if sea burials allowed for some (biodegradable) offerings such as flowers to be thrown into the sea, if they were conducted in locations removed from swimming beaches and out of the line of sight of seaside condominiums, or if religious leaders or even pop stars adopted the practice, that could go some way towards addressing prejudices.

Death relates to the strongest of human emotions – grief, loss and remembrance. These are intensely personal.

But the practical issues relating to what happens to the deceased also reflect wider social, economic, political and cultural predicaments.

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